

# Art in America



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## ROME

### Fabio Mauri at Il Ponte Contemporanea

The exhibition "Arte Negre" offered a penetrating view of Fabio Mauri's diverse art production from the 1960s and '70s. Like many European conceptual artists, Mauri (b. 1926) moves back and forth between text-based strategies and imagery, both graphic and photographic, the latter cropped and altered in various ways. His independence from stylistic and material bounds has long been a hallmark of his hard-to-classify practice, as has been his abiding interest in the political dimensions of images.

Three separate series were on display. The most comprehensible for a first-time viewer is the "Manipolazione di Cultura" (Manipulation of Culture), made in the early to mid-'70s. In each of these pieces, black-and-white images culled from photographic sources dating to the Nazi and Italian Fascist periods were transferred onto canvas. Some are relatively bland, such as a couple seated on a blanket. Others are more loaded, as in a nighttime photograph of a small group of people on a parade ground extending their arms in a Fascist salute. Below each image is a band of black paint (a black armband was a symbol of Fascism), and below the canvas is a title plate that refers to the activity portrayed in the photo. The play between the obtrusiveness of such elements as swastikas and the unobtrusiveness of routine activities is precisely what Mauri is interested in getting the viewer to ponder. How does totalitarian thought come to dominate a society? What lines are drawn to distinguish the political from the everyday? Mauri seems to suggest that fascism develops slowly and is barely perceptible during certain of its historical moments.

Another series, "Gli Schermi" (The Screens), begun in 1957 and ongoing, was presented in low-relief wall works (falling somewhere between Enrico Castellani and Francesco Lo Savio) and as an artist's book. In the wall works, a blank canvas, shaped something like a TV screen, is raised by a flat plate behind it. Below, written in Gothic script on a separate canvas that is still within the frame, are German phrases that draw on philosophical sources. With his empty screens and their paradoxi-



Fabio Mauri: *Tanning*, from the "Manipulation of Culture" series, 1975, photograph and acrylic on canvas, 63 by 39¼ inches; at Il Ponte Contemporanea.

cal relationship to content, Mauri incites the viewer to consider projections—where they come from and where they end up.

The third series is indeed titled "Le Proiezioni" (The Projections), and consists of found films shown on unconventional viewing surfaces. For this installment, Mauri projected propaganda and independent films onto lockers borrowed from the Rebibbia Prison in Rome, in which visitors to the jail are asked to place their belongings. The piece epitomizes Mauri's view that images and power move in and out of focus, providing a lesson to look at carefully, given the political climate today.

—John O'Brien

Tomas Schmit: *John Cage's bike, flying*, 2002, colored pencil on paper, 17 by 12 inches; at Michael Werner.

